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Feds Shall Prof in His Search For Information

By FRANK SUTHERLAND
Tennessee Staff Writer

Larry L. Burris discovered as a public affairs officer for the U. S. Air Force that the government might have a dual standard for allowing classified information to be printed — one for "friendly" publications and another for "non-friends."

Now an instructor at Middle Tennessee State University, Burris is writing his doctoral thesis about government policy toward media that publish classified material, and he finds himself in both a bureaucratic and a financial bind.

Burris has run into his own roadblock with the Department of Justice and the CIA.

He is attempting to use the Freedom of Information Act to research those agencies' files about newspapers. He wants to know whether the government has investigated, prosecuted, harassed or stonewalled newspapers considering the publication of classified information.

INSTEAD OF information, though, Burris has run into obstacles: runarounds from government bureaucrats and demands for large fees just to conduct a search for the files he wants. And even if he pays for the search, the documents he wants still are subject to governmental censorship and an expensive duplicating fee.

Burris was told by the government that his research, which he plans to use in a book, was not of benefit to the general public. Hence, he was told, large search fees would be justified.

However, Burris claims that what he wishes to learn must be in the public interest; if the investigations he seeks to uncover were conducted for the benefit of the public. Thus, he is seeking to have the search fees waived. And, as a last resort, he may go to court.

"If they have conducted investigations, ostensibly for the public, then the public ought to know about them," Burris said.

NOT AS a starting point, Burris went to the Justice Department. He asked 17 newspapers he knew of which were involved with publication of classified information. He was told the bill for the search would be \$992, with no guarantee that the search would uncover anything.

Burris also wrote the CIA asking for information on four newspapers. The CIA responded that this search would cost him \$100 per newspaper, or \$400 — a rather formidable sum to come up with on his instructor's salary.

These two experiences frustrated Burris, for he had planned much more extensive research which he cannot afford.

Burris has sought help from his university, his congressman and journalism organizations — but none has been able to provide financial or legal support.

"A COURT fight could be expensive and, at some point, I have to get the money for court fees," Burris said. "I prefer to fight it out over the principles rather than pay the fees. If they waive the fees, that's the best result of all, but it doesn't look like they are going to do that."

Burris knows firsthand how the Defense Department and the government work to delay or kill newspaper and television stories. That once was Burris' job with the Air Force.

"I would call up newspapers all the time and ask them not to run stories," Burris said. "My superiors really didn't understand how the media work, and they often ordered me to kill stories. I tried to explain that things didn't work that way. But I still went to see the publishers and owners."

BURRIS WAS a captain in Air Force Public Affairs in 1976 when he began learning about the documents he wanted — classified information.

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